

8 Connection to Country

Perth Airport is on the traditional lands of the Whadjuk people, a dialect group of the Noongar Nation which encompassed the entire south-western region of Western Australia. The Whadjuk people have a deep and continuing connection to the land and hold significant cultural and spiritual ties to their ancestral Country.

8.1 Introduction

Connection to Country is central to the identity, culture, spirituality, and well-being of the Whadjuk people. It represents far more than just a physical connection to land — it encompasses a deep spiritual, cultural, and ancestral relationship with the land, waters, skies, and all living things.

The Environment Strategy (Part C of Master Plan 2026) provides details on the management of heritage sites on the estate. This section sets out Perth Airport's commitment to ongoing and future partnerships with the Whadjuk people to protect, celebrate, and deepen their enduring Connection to Country.

8.2 Cultural Heritage Landscape

A cultural landscape is a geographic area that has been shaped by the interaction of people with their environment over time. It encompasses both natural and cultural elements, including journey routes, and other features that reflect human activity, beliefs and values. Tangible and intangible heritage values create a rich narrative reflecting the history, traditions, and ways of life of the people associated with the cultural landscape.

The cultural landscape of Perth Airport is located on the Swan Coastal Plain between the Darling Scarp and the Swan River and reflects the enduring relationship between Aboriginal people and their environment. It is particularly significant for its Aboriginal heritage, which includes mythological importance and symbolic meanings. It is also highly valued for its natural beauty, offering insights into the use and management of natural resources and sustainable land use practices. The estate showcases evidence of continuous occupation throughout various periods of climate change, as well as indications of technological development, while also revealing signs of human modification and intervention.

8.3 Perth Airport Cultural Map

For Noongar people, cross cultural maps present a visual interpretation of a living land. Cultural landscapes offer an Indigenous worldview which presents an opportunity to consider the principles of ‘caring for country’ in a non-Indigenous environment.

A Cultural Map of Perth Airport has been developed to identify and acknowledge the airport’s location on Whadjuk Noongar land, and that beneath the urban landscape the land has a story to tell. It provides two-way learning that drives Perth Airport going forward, particularly for future development.

The Perth Airport Cultural Map, Boodjar Waangki-ny, was developed through the storytelling of Whadjuk Noongar people together with findings of archaeological surveys undertaken on the estate, and other detailed research. The archaeology of sites and research findings tell the stories about the places where Noongar people camped, held their ceremonies and corroborees, and accessed food.

The Perth Airport Cultural Map is shown in Figure 10-1. It aims to impart an accurate version of the narrative by interpreting and presenting those cultural elements that are the most important depictions of Noongar Culture. The key themes for the Cultural Map include camp sites (represented by orange dots), homes or camps (represented by background circles), artefact scatters (represented by small yellow fires), Munday Swamp, turtle hunting, eating yorn (bobtails), Allawah Grove, bidi (tracks), family, culture, as well as the current built environment of the airport estate.

The map recognises that the Perth Airport estate is situated close to the Derbarl Yerrigan (the Swan River), which was carved through the land by the Waugyl (also written Waugal, Waagal and other variants), the sacred dreaming serpent. The Waugyl is still embodied in the river, and watches over the Custodians of the land while it snoozes in the curves and crevices, flowing under and over the land. The Waugyl, and thousands of years of caring for the land, ties the Whadjuk Noongar people to this country, and the network of places where they lived, hunted and nurtured Country on and around the Perth Airport estate is a vital part of that ongoing connection.

The Cultural Map is included within the Perth Airport spatial data system used to inform planning and operations across the estate.

8.4 Heritage Site Register

There are a number of Aboriginal heritage sites, artefact scatters and areas of cultural significance from ancient, historical and contemporary times within the boundaries of the Perth Airport estate that are listed on the Western Australian Government’s Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Inquiry System. Further information on the management and protection of these sites can be found in Part C - Environment Strategy (Section 11 - Land, Air and Biodiversity).

8.5 Heritage Strategy

Perth Airport is working to the following five principles as part of a broader strategy:



Partnership, engagement, consultation, collaboration and consent



Protection and management of heritage



Cultural awareness, respect and recognition



Capacity building and self-determination in caring for Country



Compliance and approvals

Cultural landscapes offer an Indigenous worldview which presents an opportunity to consider the principles of ‘caring for country’ in a non-Indigenous environment.



Figure 8-1 Perth Airport Cross Cultural Map, Boodjar Waangki-ny
Source: Karrda Pty Ltd



Image supplied by Tourism WA

Perth Airport is committed to ongoing engagement with the Traditional Owners and Custodians in a manner that recognises the importance of the area to the Noongar community and acknowledges the strong link that exists with the land on which Perth Airport is located.

8.5.1 Partnership, Engagement, Consultation, Collaboration and Consent

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The Perth Airport estate is situated within the South West Native Title Settlement (the Settlement). The Settlement is made up of six individual Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) with the Whadjuk People ILUA Agreement Area, relevant to the Perth Airport estate.

The Whadjuk Aboriginal Corporation was established under the Whadjuk People ILUA and is the mandated Native Title Party with which Perth Airport must undertake consultation on Aboriginal cultural heritage matters. The Whadjuk Aboriginal Corporation’s Cultural Advice Committee is made up of Elders who consider matters relevant to Culture, and make decisions to promote and protect our cultural interests. Perth Airport engages with the Whadjuk Aboriginal Corporation and its Cultural Advice Committee regularly, working together to provide economic and commercial opportunities for the community, and support the Whadjuk people in practicing and promoting their enduring Culture.

In 2009, Perth Airport entered into a partnership agreement with Traditional Owners and Custodians with a longstanding association with the airport estate. This agreement is referred to as the Partnership Agreement Group (the PAG).

The PAG now consists of representatives of seven Noongar families and is a high-level steering group that aims to create a shared vision for reconciliation, focused on preserving Aboriginal heritage and promoting the advancement of Aboriginal people within the airport estate.

Perth Airport proactively engages with the Whadjuk Aboriginal Corporation, the PAG and the wider Noongar community in relation to:

- projects and developments on the estate
- cultural-awareness activities for heritage
- ongoing compliance with heritage legislation
- facilitating economic opportunities, such as employment of Aboriginal people in cultural heritage awareness and land management activities
- recognition of Country
- sponsorship of projects that benefit the Aboriginal community, and
- land management, and continued access to heritage places for cultural activities.

Perth Airport is committed to managing Aboriginal sites in a culturally sensitive manner and in accordance with relevant legislation. Heritage assessments and consultation with the PAG and other cultural knowledge holders ensures that potential impacts to Aboriginal heritage values from development and ongoing operation of the airport are considered, managed and mitigated where possible. The results obtained from consultations, heritage assessments and subsequent archaeological and ethnographic investigations continue to be used by Perth Airport to inform the short and long-term planning, operation and development of the estate.

At the request of the PAG, a security fence around Munday Swamp was constructed in 2021 to provide security for the heritage site and protection of fauna, with pedestrian gates incorporated into the design to allow unhindered access to the site by Traditional Owners and Custodians.

Five-year initiative: Engage with Aboriginal stakeholders to develop cultural heritage management plans and incorporate cultural elements into new developments and projects.

8.5.2 Protection and Management of Heritage

As the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land, the Noongar people maintain a strong interest in the airport land and its management. Activities on the Perth Airport estate have the potential to impact Aboriginal heritage through ground disturbance that may either directly or indirectly impact on known and unknown sites, or through altering natural values by the removal or disturbance of wetlands and vegetation, that may impact the Aboriginal community’s connection to the land.

Aboriginal cultural heritage management and engagement at Perth Airport are guided by regulatory approval documents, internal policies, management plans and guidelines. These documents outline the management of cultural heritage in the preservation, management and promotion of cultural landscape, including heritage sites, artefacts, and traditions in a culturally appropriate manner. Some key documents include:

- Mapping Boodjar Waangki-ny Cultural Map—documents and visually maps the Perth Airport estate in a way that interprets and presents the cultural elements that are the most important depictions of Noongar Culture
- Reconciliation Action Plan—outlines actions for achieving Perth Airport’s vision for reconciliation and providing tangible and substantive benefits for Aboriginal peoples
- Perth Airport Sustainability Framework and Social Value Strategy—captures strategies and action plans for Aboriginal heritage management and engagement which Perth Airport has in place, to make a meaningful social and environmental contribution to the people of Western Australia, and
- Perth Airport Master Plan 2026 (this document)—guides decision-making across the Perth Airport estate and includes a five-year action plan for cultural heritage management.

Tenant and contractor Environment Management Plans (described in Section 11.2.16) are required to detail the measures that will be implemented for protecting Aboriginal and non-indigenous heritage during specific development works and/or throughout the operation of the tenant facility. This includes plans for issuing a Stop Work Order should any suspected cultural material or skeletal remains be found during works.

In consultation and with advice from the PAG, specialist design consultants completed multiple re-designs of the infrastructure and taxiways required to support Perth’s new runway to better protect Munday Swamp and other heritage sites, including the avoidance of impact to heritage site Place ID 3896 Munday Swamp: Poison Gully.

Five-year initiative: Consult and collaborate with Whadjuk Traditional Owners and Custodians to improve heritage and land management on the estate.



Image supplied by Tourism WA

Perth Airport is committed to showcasing, celebrating and reflecting the deep historical, cultural and spiritual ties that First Nations Australians have to the lands and waters.



Artefact display at the Perth Airport Alpha Building

8.5.3 Artefact Conservation

The airport estate has been the subject of ongoing archaeological and ethnographic investigation since the 1980s. Artefacts have been recovered from the estate, mostly from the surface but also below ground. The artefacts recovered include a wide range of materials from which stone tools were made including blades, flakes, scrapers and grinding stones.

More recently, an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Management Plan was developed in consultation with the PAG for the construction of the new runway. The plan identifies the heritage values of the project area and guides the actions of Perth Airport to mitigate impact to heritage values, including undertaking large-scale excavation and the collection and curation of artefacts identified in monitoring or in salvage excavation.

Excavation and salvage of a sample of the three known high-potential areas within the new runway project area, was conducted in 2021 and 2022, with more than 200 pieces of cultural material collected. The artefacts were found at the surface and continued down to a depth of around two metres. Optically Stimulated Luminescence dating of the soil from the digs indicates the artefacts accumulated over a period of 41,000 years, with these sites representing the oldest sites known in Perth. At the request of Traditional Owners and Custodians, all cultural material salvaged during the construction of the new runway is to be assessed by an archaeologist of standing in the Noongar community; the artefacts will be available for display within Perth Airport buildings and terminals.

In consultation with the PAG, an artefact display was installed in the Alpha office building (located in the Airport West precinct) to showcase some of the artefacts found during the initial excavation and salvage activities for the new runway.

8.5.4 Cultural Awareness, Respect and Recognition

Perth Airport is committed to showcasing, celebrating and reflecting the deep historical, cultural and spiritual ties that First Nations Australians have to the lands and waters, with a range of initiatives already implemented to increase the visibility of the Noongar Whadjuk language and culture throughout the airport terminals and wider estate.

NAIDOC Week celebrations are held annually at Perth Airport, including Welcome to Country ceremonies, dancing, art exhibitions and cultural activities for staff. Cultural ceremonies are also included for other key events at the airport.

In consultation with Traditional Owners and Custodians, Welcome to Country messages in Noongar and English have been installed in all airport terminals. Aboriginal art is also displayed throughout the terminals and Perth Airport office buildings, and the airport regularly purchases pieces to add to the corporate collection.

Completed in October 2020, the pedestrian skybridge connecting the Airport Central train station to the T1 International forecourt was named Worl Bidi (Worl meaning sky, and bidi meaning path) by the PAG. The design incorporated a unique soundscape to reflect the significance of the Swan River and Whadjuk Country to local Noongar families. The soundscape offers a short audio journey through the Swan River region, moving through areas of the land and waters at different times of the day and night. It takes listeners from one end of the Swan River to the other over the course of a day, featuring differing weather conditions, and a Traditional Custodian sharing stories and viewpoints from a cultural perspective. At each end of the Worl Bidi is a striking mural, painted by Whadjuk Baladong artist Jade Dolman, that links to the soundscape. The travelers also feature artwork by Noongar artist Crispian Warrell. This work tells of travelling along the Swan River, and of the flora and fauna within Country.

As a show of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the almost 60 destinations Perth Airport serves around Australia, and to educate passengers and airport staff on the history and rich Indigenous Culture of the places they are visiting, in 2021 Perth Airport became the first major airport in Australia to recognise the Traditional Owners and Custodians of each flight destination. Flight information display screens and boarding gates throughout T1 Domestic, T3 and T4, rotate between the commonly used name of the destination and the name of the language group for the Traditional Owners and Custodians of that place.

Illuminated kaya (Noongar for hello) welcome signs have been installed on Dunreath Drive and Airport Drive. The six-metre-high signs light up to reflect the six seasons of the Noongar calendar and are adorned with Indigenous symbols that reflect the landscape and meaning of Wadjak Boodja.

The Alpha office building has incorporated direct recognition of the PAG through allocating PAG member family names to key meeting rooms.

Five-year initiative: Incorporate cultural awareness on the Perth Airport estate.

8.5.5 Building Capacity, Prosperity and Self-determination in Caring for Country

By fostering community-led initiatives that promote sustainable land management practices, Perth Airport aims to empower Aboriginal people to take active roles in preserving their cultural heritage and enhancing ecological health. This approach involves collaborative partnerships with Aboriginal organisations, government agencies, community groups, and educational institutions to provide training and resources for initiatives, supporting both environmental stewardship and economic development. Through these efforts to unite nature with culture, Perth Airport seeks to create pathways for Aboriginal people to care for their ancestral lands, leading to stronger, more resilient communities equipped to shape their own futures.

Aboriginal businesses have been engaged to undertake ongoing land management activities within heritage areas such as Munday Swamp and Redcliffe Wetland.

Five-year initiative: Continue to undertake land management activities to build and strengthen relationships and benefit Noongar communities.

8.5.6 Compliance And Legislative Approvals

Western Australia recognises Aboriginal cultural sites and objects of significance and makes specific provision for traditional use through the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 (WA) (AH Act). The AH Act protects and manages Aboriginal Heritage by requiring approval for activities that may impact or cause harm to an Aboriginal site.

Perth Airport personnel, contractors and tenants involved in ground disturbance activities within registered Aboriginal sites are obliged to comply with the AH Act. Further information on the management and protection of these sites can be found in Part C - Environment Strategy (Section 11 - Land, Air and Biodiversity)



Part C

Environment Strategy

- 9 Environmental Management
- 10 Climate Change
and Resource Use
- 11 Land, Air and Biodiversity